

## COLONEL DE LA TOUR DU PIN (THE COLONEL WITH THE FRYING-PAN) A FRENCH OFFICER IN THE CHARGE OF THE LIGHT BRIGADE

By Dr Douglas J Austin      11      [ TWC 25(2) p33 2007 ]

Two officers of the Piedmont-Sardinian army (Major Giuseppe Govone and Lieutenant Giuseppe Landriani) took part in the Charge of the Light Brigade at Balaklava on 25th October, 1854. While translating French texts on the war, I have found evidence that a remarkable - indeed amazing - French officer also took part. With some confidence, given his name and his dates of birth and death, I can identify him as Colonel Louis Gabriel Aymard de la Tour, Marquis de la Tour du Pin de La Charce. He was born on 12 June 1806 in Paris and was the son of René, Marquis de la Tour du Pin and Honorine Grimaldi (of the princely house of Monaco). He gained the title of Marquis du Pin de La Charce in 1832 and died on 11 November 1855 at 49 years of age. (See <http://www.thepeerage.com/p8783.htm#i87828>)

Paul de Molènes served in the Crimea and wrote, describing the Battle of Balaklava in his book *‘Les Commentaires d'un Soldat’* (Lévy, Paris, 1866), on pp 94-95, “General Canrobert went down to the valley where he remained for a long time. We saw the enemy troops, become motionless, forming in front of us in the space, black patches or dark lines no longer clearly illuminated...Each man went back to his bivouac. With profound pleasure, I found in my tent Colonel de la Tour du Pin, who had taken part as a volunteer in the charge of the English cavalry. A cannon ball, by breaking the leg of his horse, had stopped him in his tracks. He returned unwounded from this bloody fray, which had involved the taste for adventure, the seductions of danger and the antique traditions of the warlike spirit of our nation.”

In confirmation, Germain Bapst, in his *“Le Maréchal Canrobert : Souvenirs d'un Siècle”* (Librairie Pion, Paris, 1902; Volume 2) wrote, on p 322; “At our distance, we made out the famous officers of this light cavalry; at the head was Lord Cardigan and, to his right, Captain Nolan; then, the English appeared to us: Lord George Paget, son of the cavalry general at Waterloo; Lord Paulet, Lord FitzGibbons [*sic*], Colonels Douglas and Shewell, the French staff Colonel de La Tour-du-Pin and the Sardinian Captain Landriani, military attaché to the English army: both had not wanted to miss this opportunity to take part in this ride, which promised to be exciting.”

On pp 369-370, we find; “The staff had also a quite curious host, Colonel de La Tour du Pin, an elevated spirit, elegant writer and deep thinker; he was afflicted with an extraordinary deafness, which did not allow him any more active employment. In the Crimea as an amateur, he there pushed bravery and the spirit of adventure to a particular degree: at Balaklava, as soon as he saw the Charge of the Light Cavalry starting, he galloped to join the Light Dragoons and charged with them until the end; at Inkerman, he was with the Coldstreams at the Sandbag Battery; later, at the attack on the Mamelon Vert, he marched with some Zouaves on the Malakoff Tower, and, because he was deaf and did not hear the bugles which sounded the retirement, he kept on going. He held in his hand a silver ear-trumpet, and the soldiers, who were accustomed to see him in the forefront as soon as there was a rifle shot, called him “the colonel with the frying pan”. One day, General Canrobert, at dinner, shouted to him so that he heard: “I would wish you to have as your tomb a pyramid one hundred cubits high on which would be written: “Here lies a valiant knight of former times who strayed among us.” General Canrobert, in a word, had depicted this character of another age, whose type has completely disappeared from our customs, a sort of crusader who went throughout the world, liking war for war's sake, of exemplary simplicity and sobriety, always content, good, benevolent to all. He wrote, in the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, articles full of feeling and unexpected perceptions. He died in the attack on the Malakoff [*He was seriously wounded there, but died in France*], where he was at the side of General MacMahon, on one of the traverses.” Intrigued by this unusual personage, I have searched further, finding that Colonel de la Tour du Pin certainly

appears in the Earl of Cardigan's '*Eight Months on Active Service*' (Clowes & Sons, London, 1855) on p 47, "Saturday, 8th July. - Commenced our march at half-past 4 o'clock this morning, and reached Shumla at noon. Bivouacked near the ramparts, although I found a house ready prepared, and a guard ordered, by Omar Pacha. Dined with the French traveller and the Marquis La Tour du Pin at a restaurant; my aide-de-camp Lord Dupplin with me. Lord Burghersh had left me in the morning, on line of march to return to Varna. Lieutenant Maxse came over from Devena (Devna)."

He may also figure on pp 29-30 of Private Robert Stuart Farquharson's '*Reminiscences of Crimean Campaigning and Russian Imprisonment*', *By One of 'The Six Hundred*.' (Thomas Allen, Edinburgh, 1883); "Whilst we waited here Captain Nolan and a French officer were reconnoitring the position of the enemy, who were now in possession of the hills from No. 1 to No. 5 Turkish redoubts. An aide-de-camp from Lord Raglan came up with an order that the Light Brigade of cavalry was to attack the enemy, and recapture, if possible, some 4 guns the latter were carrying off from the Turkish redoubts." [That French officer may well have been Colonel de la Tour du Pin. I believe, by the way, that the word-sets 'Captain Nolan' and 'An aide-de-camp' should change places.]

To judge from Jean Joseph Gustave Cler's book '*Reminiscences of an officer of Zouaves. Tr. from the French*.' (D. Appleton and Company, New York, London, 1860), Colonel de la Tour du Pin was already very well known in the French army. Thus, describing the Algerian campaign of 1853, Cler wrote on pp 84-86, "Their progress down the hill had been marked by one of those traits of reckless daring, on the part of Colonel de La Tour-du-Pin, an officer of the staff, for which that officer's reputation was so well established. Colonel de La Tour-du-Pin, to whom we shall again devote a few lines in our narrative of the expedition to the Crimea, was a man of an antique type of character. Surnamed by the officers of the army "the La Tour d'Auvergne of our day", he was well known to every one in Africa, but especially to the Zouaves, whom he was in the habit of accompanying, as an amateur, on all their expeditions. Having been put on the retired list on account of excessive deafness, de La Tour-du-Pin, whose passion for war was perfectly absorbing, never let slip any opportunity of gratifying it; betaking himself for that purpose to any country, which offered him a chance of fighting, dangers, or glory. He had thus served as a volunteer in the Holstein war and, having recently obtained that which he esteemed as the greatest of favours, the permission to accompany the expedition to the Babors, he was, as a matter of course, present on the occasion of the attack on the Takoucht, with the Zouaves of Colonel Cler. The retreat had been just sounded, and the extreme rear-guard was in the act of falling back upon the reserve, when, turning round to see what the Kabyles were at, Colonel Cler perceived, away off in the distance, a man seated astride of a pinnacle of rock, and who seemed to be exposed, on one side, to all the fire of the Kabyles, on the other, to that of the French. He at first supposed, that it must be some bold chief of the enemy, who, out of a spirit of bravado, made it a point of honour to be thus the first in arriving at the positions abandoned by the French. But he was quickly undeceived by hearing a Zouave exclaim "Why, it's the Colonel with the frying-pan!", for so had the Zouaves christened the brave de La Tour-du-Pin, on account of the ear-trumpet which he was compelled to carry with him. And, in fact, on taking a second and more careful look at him, Colonel Cler could no longer doubt, that the individual, thus tranquilly perched aloft, and who appeared to be so earnestly engaged in examining the Kabyles through his telescope, was no other than the veritable Colonel with the frying-pan himself; who, meanwhile, was being made a perfect target of by the mountaineers, and calmly receiving their concentrated fire at the distance of only a few hundred metres. Of course, immediate orders were given to the Zouaves, to turn once more upon the enemy, drive them back, carry off, by force if necessary, this reckless observer, and bring him back with them, himself, his horse, his frying-pan, and his telescope. De la Tour-du-Pin, disturbed in the observations which he was in the act of making on the range of the Kabyle firelocks, was almost vexed at the interruption; but the orders given to the Zouaves were precise and positive, and so, he had to submit with the best grace

possible, to the seizure operated by them on his person, and to undergo besides, not only the friendly reproaches of the officers, but the mocking laughter of the Zouaves.

Still more remarkable was the good Colonel's conduct in the Crimea (1854-1855), described by Cler on pp 291-296 of his book, "We have already had occasion, in our relation of the campaign in the Babor, to speak of Colonel de La Tour du Pin, of the staff. And, from the sketch then given of his character, it may be readily conceived, that this eccentric officer - whose passion for danger and glory was pushed to such a remarkable extreme - was little likely to see the Zouaves starting off for the East, without being strongly tempted to follow them. Accordingly, Colonel Cler's jackals had been but a short time in the Crimea, when their friend, the colonel with the frying-pan, turned up there, too - as rash, as reckless, and imprudent as ever - and whenever he made his appearance in their camp, knowing what such visits usually portended, they could again repeat, with the same confident assurance as in the past, "Ha! Ha! There'll be tobacco to smoke, soon!" And, in fact, their previsions were seldom disappointed; for all infirm as he was - and cut off by his infirmity from taking any more active part in the scenes in which his soul delighted, than that of a simple volunteer - yet this poor, gallant officer never let slip any occasion of exposing himself to ball or bullet, provided he could thereby secure a nearer and better view of a battle, or skirmish. He almost seemed to be present, on these occasions, as a judge of the lists, or, at least, as the second for both parties in their colossal duel and it was difficult for one who saw him there, so cool, and calm, and imperturbable, under the hottest fire and amid the bloodiest carnage, not to fancy him endowed, like Achilles, with the quality of perfect invulnerability, even to his heel!

Having, on the 26th of October [the day after Balaklava], learned that the Colonel of the 2nd Zouaves was on trench duty on the extreme left of our Left Attack, and that new approaches were to have been commenced during the night, de La Tour du Pin hastened to join his friend at his perilous post. Already, several of the batteries in the Russian counter-approaches had been unmasked, and were beginning to rain death into the French trenches, while the line of the parallel was barely more than traced along the ground, yet this was precisely the moment chosen by de La Tour du Pin, to seat himself quietly there, by the side of his friend, and begin a conversation upon the future character, and probable results of the siege operations. Colonel Cler tried to point out to him, the danger to which he was exposing himself, and the impropriety and uselessness of thus risking his life, when there was no obligation of duty for him to do so. Whereupon, de La Tour du Pin branched off into a discussion of the merits of the Russian fire, maintaining, for his own part, its utter inefficacy. It so happened that, just at that moment, and as if to expose the fallacy of his opinion, a Russian round shot, knocking over the sand-bag behind them, passed right between the two friends - while the dead and wounded, who lay around them, together with the many scattered fragments of exploded bombs and shells, seemed to afford pretty convincing evidence, that the Russians were anything but in the habit of wasting their powder! Yet in spite of all these proofs to the contrary, de La Tour du Pin clung pertinaciously to his opinion; and the Colonel of the 2nd Zouaves was reduced, at length, to the necessity of employing almost as much force as persuasion, to induce his friend to quit the place. Soon after occurred the battle of Inkermann, and, as may well be supposed, he took good care not to lose such a glorious opportunity of gratifying his favourite passion. And, although he accompanied General Bosquet's battalions into the thickest of the fight, and never left them while it lasted, he had the good fortune to come off with no more serious injury, than a trifling scratch in the face. When the weight of our attack was turned against the Malakoff, de La Tour du Pin seized every opportunity of studying the town from that quarter, and, especially, of watching what went on in the harbour; he, to this end, paid repeated visits to the camp of the mill of Inkermann. One day, he came and besought his friend for permission to visit the furthest outposts. Captain de la Vaissiere, one of the adjutants of the regiment, offered to guide him out, as far as one of our rifle-pits, which, though occupied at night, was abandoned during the day, on account of its too great exposure to the enemy's fire, and they accordingly started off together. On arriving there, de La Tour du Pin took leave of his companion, who returned to his duties, and

nestling quietly down into the most comfortable position he could find, with no other company than his spy-glass, began leisurely to reconnoitre the Point battery and upper end of the harbour. When he had completed, to his satisfaction, his prolonged and searching examination of these points, he got up to go and following, as he supposed, the path by which he had come, tried to make his way back to the nearest grand guard. But, unfortunately, the path was not very distinctly marked out, the ground being very stony and covered with brambles, besides being cut up with ravines, and of a very uneven surface and, being moreover extremely near-sighted, he gradually took a wrong direction, and soon became completely lost. After wandering about for some time, without the slightest idea of where he was, but noticing that the holes, ploughed in the ground by round shot, and the traces of their passage on the surrounding rocks, were becoming much more frequent, and that little columns of dust were incessantly being knocked up all round him, he finally came to the conclusion, that he must be approaching the town and, meanwhile, was serving as a target for the Russian sharpshooters! He then faced about; indeed, it was quite time for him to do so, and trusting to Providence, set off in the opposite direction, succeeding, finally, after perambulating round for an hour or so, in getting safely back to the French outposts, more confirmed, than ever, in his contemptuous opinion of the Russian marksmanship. On the 18th of June, the fearless Colonel set out with the leading columns, and was present, as an amateur, at the whole of the terrible combat, in which were engaged the divisions of Generals Brunet and Mayran. And when the bleeding remnants of these two divisions were obliged to fall back, over the open space where they had already suffered so severely, the Colonel with the frying pan seated himself gravely upon the ground, there where he was, in the very centre of the battlefield, and quietly retained his position, until after the last soldier had filed past him, before he rose to resume the unruffled tenor of his own solitary course, back into the trenches! Yet here, again, he escaped unscathed! But, just as the last bloody act of the great drama was about to be played out, on the 8th of September, the day of the capture of the Malakoff, he was struck by the fragment of a shell, while following the rush of General de MacMahon's columns to the assault, and his leg was laid open by it, to the bone. Transferred to Marseille, he died there, a victim, at length, to the singular passion, which, while he lived, had impelled him upon every battle-field in Europe. The name of the intrepid and unfortunate Colonel de La Tour du Pin, is still held in affectionate remembrance among our soldiers; it will never be effaced from the hearts of those, who served with him in Africa and the Crimea. For long years yet to come, as they gather round their bivouac fires, will the Zouaves of the 2nd regiment, especially, relate to one another the daring exploits, and amusing adventures, of their friend, the Colonel with the frying pan. And when the memory of other actors in the same scenes, has wholly passed away, no doubt his romantic history will still form the theme, of some thrilling legend of the camps."

My final sightings of Colonel de la Tour du Pin appeared in Bazancourt's '*L'Expédition de Crimée jusqu'à la Prise de Sébastopol*' (Librairie Amyot, Paris, 1857 ; Vol. 2) on p 370 and pp 455-456. Describing the failed attack of 8 June, 1855, the former reads; "Soon officers who had been sent to the Lancaster battery gave the first news: the mortal wounding of General Mayran, the death of General Brunet and the failure of their divisions' attacks; then, to all this noise, all this agitation, the resounding echo of combat, a deadly silence succeeded. This silence choked all hearts, because it meant that we had failed. Colonel de la Tour du Pin, who had served as a volunteer since the beginning of the campaign, and who fought with a insensate ardour, but with heroic and chivalrous courage, everywhere where one fought, came to tell the Corps d'Observation the sad details of this fatal morning. His emotion was so sharp, that he could hardly speak. It was a day of failure, among many days of victory." Dealing with the taking of the Malakoff on 8th September, 1855, the latter has; "Colonel de la Tour du Pin was one of these men who have within them the sacred fire of war. He liked danger and, with feverish activity, he sought the manly emotions of combat. A student at Saint-Cyr military school, he entered the army as a second lieutenant in 1826. After two years at the Staff School, he spent several years in Africa. A Captain in 1833, he was aide-de-camp of General Trobriand, then of Marshal Clausel, the governor of

Algeria; a distinguished officer, full of instruction and real and solid qualities, he was loved and appreciated by all; he was also attached, as an aide-de-camp to General Changamier. In 1841, he was promoted to major, after being wounded by a shot. Unfortunately, a cruel infirmity was to block the military career of Commandant de la Tour du Pin. In 1843, he was placed on the inactive list, and employed, as an officer without post, with the staff of the Minister for War. In 1848, he was returned to active service at his urgent request, because for him it was a bitter pain to find himself set aside. He was named a lieutenant-colonel in case of war in 1848, and a colonel in 1853; even at this time, the deafness with which he was afflicted caused him again to be placed on the inactive list. He consequently did not seek to struggle against the fate which was thus destined to destroy his future; but what was his pain when an army embarked for the East! All his warlike instincts awoke, and the colonel, expecting no advancement, asked to leave as a volunteer. He left; and during all the time that he remained in the Crimea, he was always seen in every combat, in the first rank, wishing the greatest part in danger, that he loved passionately. Perhaps this love of danger was only weariness of life, and the colonel sought from heaven, which had so cruelly burdened him, its last favour - to die as a soldier. He was at the Alma, he was at Inkermann, where he was wounded; he stayed with the siege of Sebastopol. Every day he entered the trenches: as soon as an operation was decided, he ran there, and with no other aim than to face death, he threw himself into the middle of those who fought: and everyone knew it, from the Generals to the soldiers. Thus he took part in all the great actions of this memorable siege; thus he was wounded a second time, in the attack on the Malakoff tower, on September 8. The Minister for War did not want such conduct to remain without reward, and he was promoted to the rank of Commander in the Legion d'Honneur. Unfortunately, he was not to enjoy this honour for long; he died from the consequences of his final wound, at the moment when he returned to France."

I must conclude, with Bazancourt, that this French officer may have been possessed by a death-wish. We are left with the slightly ludicrous image of a wildly adventurous and brave officer, equipped with a silver ear-trumpet, charging with the Light Brigade! None, however can surely doubt his courage and devotion to duty.